
Enough Bread

Starting this morning and for the next four Sundays in a row, our worship services are built around the sixth chapter of the gospel according to John!

For those of you who have been waiting for a sermon series, get out your calendars for we begin in earnest this day.

For those of you who love the unique and mysterious language of John's gospel with all its twists and turns, its signs, and miracles, come ready to be spiritually fed.

For those of you who find the gospel of John too dense, puzzling, or confusing—consider yourselves forearmed and make your plans accordingly.

Alternately, you might choose to attune your hearts and minds and bodies to some new thing that might be gained from looking at the text in a whole new way.

You see, that's what happened to me.

As I came to the task of preparing for this morning, I found myself wondering where my thoughts, the thoughts of other biblical scholars I read, and my own experience of the text might take me.

Much to my own surprise, when I listened in on the Tuesday morning bible study conversation about this text, I noticed something new about the first story I hadn't noticed before.

What new thing did I notice about the story of the miracle of the feeding of the 5000?

In the context of how Jesus might be viewing the growing crowds following him, and their longing for both spiritual and material nurture, here's what I noticed:

I noticed how Jesus invited his disciples into the important work of collaborative problem solving.

With one eye on the hungry crowd streaming up the mountainside, and the other eye on Philip, Jesus says: "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?"

From the reading, it's clear to me that Philip must have thought Jesus had lost his mind.

After all, their location on a mountaintop hardly lends itself to a pop up corner store, now does it!?

I can almost hear the derision in Philip's voice as he responds pragmatically to Jesus' question.

"Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get even a little bread" he says.

No sooner are the words "Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little" out of Philip's mouth than Andrew, adds his own two cents to the mix.

Boldly, he chimes in: "There's a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish."

And then perhaps less confidently, he adds: "But what are they among so many people?"

Re-reading the text, I see that Jesus' initial question to Philip about where to buy bread was intended to test him.

Indeed, the text tells us that he, Jesus already *knew* what he intended to do.

In other words, it seems to me that Jesus was intentional about inviting those first disciples into a little creative problem solving.

Though there is no way to actually prove this to be so, the end result is this:

Their collaborative observations and cumulative problem solving not only crosses generational boundaries, it provides what is needed in the very moment it is needed!

Swiftly now the story shifts as Jesus becomes much more directive in his instructions.

Telling his followers to have the people sit down on the grassy knoll, he gives thanks to God for the bread, distributes both it and the fish, and miracle of all miracles, all are fed and there are even left-overs!

From there, we discover that the gathered community, having now had their most urgent hunger needs met, immediately begin to see Jesus' potential.

Perhaps some call to mind other stories from the faith ancestors where hunger needs have been met-say like in the 16th chapter of Exodus as God, through Moses provides manna and quail. Perhaps others call to mind the story of the Jesus' resurrection appearance in the 24th chapter of Luke's gospel as asks for something to eat on the beach and it is provided.

Whatever those in the gathered crowd on the mountaintop recall, they are quick to see that Jesus is the man of the hour.

Wanting to harness his power, they determine he needs to be their next leader their 'king' but Jesus will have none of it.

Not enticed in the least by the crowd's adulation, that is, their wish to ascribe to him earthly power as their 'king', Jesus withdraws.

Or as the author of the gospel of John is recorded as saying: "When Jesus realized that they were about to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself."

From my own perspective, I wonder what did Jesus *do* in that set apart time on the mountaintop?

Did he lie down and have a little nap?

After all, surely he would have felt the need for that kind of rest.

In the chapters leading up to this morning's text, Jesus has been busy!

Turning water into wine, confronting money changers in the outer courtyard of the Temple at Jerusalem, conversing with Nicodemus by night, and talking with the Samaritan woman at the well about God's life giving waters, and then encouraging a man who had been sick for the whole of his life would require not only considerable energy, but time apart to recoup.

Even for the one the gospel writer John names as the Word of God made flesh.

Maybe in that set apart time on the mountaintop, Jesus would have found respite in prayerful conversation with God.

Maybe just the quiet in and of itself would be enough to rejuvenate him.

Whatever he did there in that set apart time remains a mystery but its model for us is clear.

Jesus' self awareness, his clarity of purpose, his embodiment of God's graciously abundant and tirelessly abiding love; and his ongoing invitation to all his followers to enter into the hard and necessarily creative and collaborative work of problem solving for God's vision of Shalom to be made real is both our model and our guide.

Anybody watching?

Anybody noticing?

This last week, representatives from our governing bodies, our presbyteries and our conferences across the country gathered in Oshawa to give the final thumbs' up on our denomination's new direction.

One of the gathered community's tasks was to elect a new moderator.

As you may already know, the Rev. Dr. Richard Bott has been elected to that role for the coming three years.

Richard, a self described polity geek was one of the ministry leaders at Pacific Spirit United Church near to where I was last called in Vancouver is a man I consider both friend and colleague.

I, for one, appreciated hearing what Richard's passion and hope for the coming three years in his new role as the leader of our denomination.

Here is a little about what I heard Richard say about this United Church of ours in his introduction speech as moderator-elect.

Richard has determined that the United Church is not dying but rather, its failing. Its failing in its efforts to build disciples.

Sound familiar?

I, for one, take take great hope that Richard's dream for this United Church of ours might lead us in the very direction where God needs us to go.

Richard's dream for the development and growth of discipleship practices sounds a bit like this:

Richard dreams that as disciples of Jesus we might be united in seeing ourselves as uplifted by God's love.

As disciples of Jesus we might find ourselves nourished by worship.

As disciples of Jesus we might find ourselves inspired by conversations from scripture.

As disciples of Jesus we might find ourselves transformed by spiritual friendships that provide a venue for our joys and our struggles as faithful followers in the way of Jesus.

And, last but never least, we might find ourselves growing in self awareness as we develop our gifts and skills for leadership through service to God for and with one another.

I, for one, felt like I was being fed spiritual bread for the journey.

In fact, it felt almost as if I were among the 5000 on the mountaintop.

Anybody watching?

Anybody noticing?

For the sake of our life in church community here at Trinity United, for the sake of our emerging clusters and regions, and for the well-being our beloved United Church of Canada, I certainly hope.

Amen.

*The impetus for this morning's reflection emerges from an examination of the text from the perspective of a number of resources including:

Craft of Preaching Dear Working Preacher, Bread of Life Sermon Series

The Bread of Life: Sermon Series on the Meaning of Holy Communion

Bread of the Preaching Life found at

www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?posts=1504; 2051; 3661

www.gc43.ca Introducing the Moderator-Elect of The United Church of Canada, Rev. Dr. Richard Bott

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